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ABSTRACT

Growing Thinkers is a teacher in-service program, designed and instituted in the Houston (Texas) Independent School District, which focuses on the development of higher-order thinking abilities. The three overall goals of the program are: (1) to recognize and further develop excellence in teaching; (2) to enhance the development of higher-order thinking in the classroom; and (3) to create a body of teachers, skilled in using higher-order thinking processes, who can model effective teaching as they share strategies with their colleagues. Each year, 24 teachers recognized for excellence and innovation in teaching are selected and then led through a year-long program in the use of higher-order thinking skills. The Growing Thinkers program has been selected by the Texas Education Agency as one of six exemplary and innovative educational programs which are offered as models to be adapted and modified by school districts to meet their varying needs. (RS)

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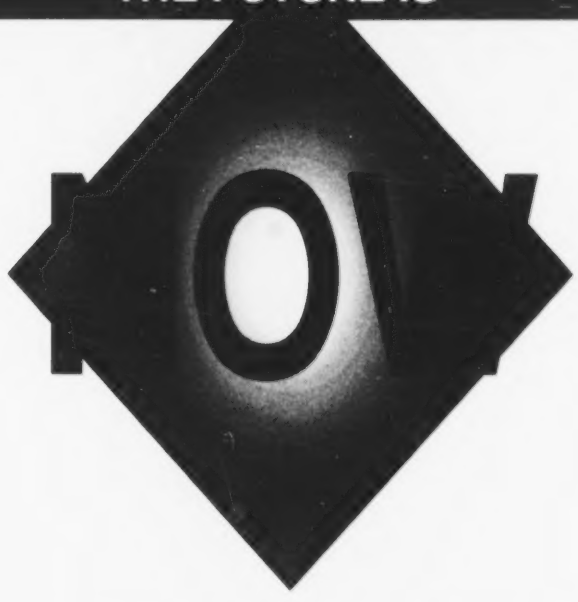

THE GROWING THINKERS PROGRAM

HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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REACH

REALISTIC EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT CAN HAPPEN

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The Challenge

"In less than fifteen years, our children will be taking this world into the twenty-first century. They will be faced with making decisions on how we want the next century to look. I am not interested in raising robots, but in people who know how to think—who can make good judgment calls for themselves, for our form of government, and for our society."

This comment by Dr. Joan Raymond, Superintendent of Houston Schools, represents the challenge for teachers today—to teach in such a way that students develop the thinking and learning abilities necessary to live in a complex and rapidly changing world.

Those who can do nothing more than take in and repeat back information will not be adequately equipped to shape the future or live well in the present. It is not enough to teach children what to think. We need to teach them how to think. But, what does it take to develop the capacity for higher-level thinking and learning in students? Answering this question, was part of the challenge that "Growing Thinkers" was designed to answer.

Improvement of teacher morale is another part of the challenge. Houston Independent School District, like other districts in the state, is faced with poor economic conditions and a loss of public trust. A questioning of teacher competency has a negative impact on teachers' attitudes about themselves and their teaching. Clearly, "good teaching" exists in the Houston schools, and this program is one avenue for building public awareness that quality education is taking place in Houston ISD. Teachers need to be recognized for the good and innovative teaching they are doing.

A third part of the challenge is the pressure of tight educational constraints many teachers are feeling. The emphasis on "basic skills" and standardized test performance and highly regulated instructional specifications give many teachers a feeling of being in a teaching straight-jacket. Some hold the impression that the school environment has become passive and sterile, and that textbooks are to be covered lavishly. A "right-answer syndrome" is predominant in schools, making some or even many feel that creative teaching is not welcome. It seems there is little encouragement to take risks or experiment with innovative methods and little time in the teaching day to move beyond basic requirements. This program provides instruction beyond basic skills by broadening the educational experience and enhancing "thinking" in the classroom.

The Learning Environment

Throughout the program, both the methods and environment necessary to support the development of thinking, are modeled. The environment is described in this way:

- The three "S's"—safe, supportive, and stimulating. The teacher maintains an atmosphere of trust and acts as a supportive coach. The setting is vibrant and varied.
- Collaborative community. Work is frequently done with partners or in groups. A spirit of community and sharing of learning prevails, rather than one of competition and self-protection.
- Immersion in language—no matter what the subject is. Communication is encouraged as students use their words and find form for their ideas.
- Active engagement in learning—physically as well as mentally. Practice and classroom experiences are aimed at authenticity and are grounded in a meaningful context.
- Deliberate pacing of activities. Students are given time to think as teachers follow a step-by-step approach.
- Time for reflection is a central characteristic of this learning environment. Students pause frequently to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning and ways of thinking through a task.

Description of the Program

Growing Thinkers is a teacher in-service program designed and instituted in the Houston Independent School District. The program selects a small number of teachers (twenty-four), recognized for excellence and innovation in teaching, and leads them through a year-long development in the use of higher-order thinking processes.

Teachers who apply for the program must be recommended by their principals. Finalists are interviewed and two participants are chosen from each elementary grade, and two from each major content area of secondary. A stipend of $1,000 is given to each teacher selected. This, along with public recognition for their excellence in teaching, serves to make clear the value that is placed not only on these individual teachers, but on teaching excellence and innovation in general.

The focus of the program is on the development of higher-order thinking abilities. The overall goal of the program is threefold:

- to recognize and further develop excellence in teaching
- to enhance the development of higher-order thinking in the classroom
- to create a body of teachers, skilled in using higher-order thinking processes, who can model effective teaching as they share strategies with their colleagues.

In a series of eleven sessions, teachers are immersed in the world of thinking. The series begins with a survey of thinking—"Exploring the Mental Landscape" and "The Thinking Teacher. The Thinking Student." Then by exploring the thinking processes of an artist, an inventor, an anthropologist, and a naturalist, and through a variety of creative and reflective activities, teachers experience first hand the excitement of using thinking capacities that go well beyond the mental storage of information. A final series of sessions focuses on synthesizing what has been learned, and then developing strategies to evaluate thinking.

Field trips are taken to a variety of sites so that participants may explore different contexts for thinking. Assigned readings that provide the latest research on cognition and the teaching of cognitive processes are discussed in these sessions. Active experiences that range from creating an invention to doing creative movement stimulate thinking and provide ideas for classroom activities.

Journals are kept by participants to encourage teaching and teacher self-assessment. Participants discover that in spite of the differences in grade levels and subject taught, there are many commonalities to the processes by which thinking, discovery, and learning take place, and all of these processes can be incorporated into their classrooms.

Because Growing Thinkers spans an entire year, the opportunities to experiment with methods and activities being learned are many. The program affords a chance to discuss with others how ideas and activities are working in the classroom. The time is sufficient for teachers to see real change in their classroom environments.

The Benefits

For the teachers:

- incorporates a great variety of thinking processes especially higher-order processes, into the regular curriculum
- improves understanding of role and characteristics of effective teaching environment
- provides information and strategies necessary to implement the teaching of thinking in the classroom
- increases teachers' expectations of themselves
- increases teachers' expectations of students
- recognizes teachers for excellence in teaching
- integrates different content and subject areas
- models a more stimulating and supportive learning environment

For the students:

- raises self-esteem and self-expectations
- exposes learners to a fuller range of thinking processes
- develops a broad range of thinking processes
- enhances experience in more creative learning strategies
- provides a more stimulating and supportive learning environment
- allows students more opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning
- increases learning through a broader range of teaching strategies
- provides strategies for posing questions and hypotheses
- teaches strategies for finding solutions to questions

For the district:

- develops a core of teachers knowledgeable in teaching higher-order thinking processes
- increases commitment to teaching by good teachers
- provides an avenue for public recognition of excellent teachers and excellence in teaching
- increases support for teaching of higher-order thinking
- broadens the range of teaching styles in the district
- creates model teachers and classrooms for developing higher-order thinking

"Excellence...is not an act, but a habit." ***Aristotle***

This document describes the Growing Thinkers Program. This program has been selected by the Texas Education Agency as one of six exemplary and/or innovative educational programs. These programs are offered as models, with the expectation that they could be modified and adapted by districts to meet their varying needs.

THE GROWING THINKERS PROGRAM

THE VISION

Growing Thinkers program is grounded in a vision. It is a vision about learning and about teaching; it is for teachers and also for students; it is about thinking and about creativity. Most of all, it is a vision about what can happen by investing in people.

"Good teaching" is happening in the schools of Houston. Part of the vision of Growing Thinkers is to provide a way to recognize those teachers who are exceptional in both teaching quality and innovation, and also to hold them up as exemplars to the community. The vision of Growing Thinkers includes a belief that by recognizing and investing in exceptional teachers, the district will encourage teachers to continue to grow and excel, that the public image of teaching will change, and that other teachers will follow the model they witnessed.

But the vision is not just to recognize work done in the past, or even the present—it is to build toward the future—a future in which teachers will feel they are the decision makers for their own classrooms, free to develop the best learning environment and experiences they can create; a future in which both teachers and students are engaged in learning that demands the use of the full network of thinking processes, not just assimilative thinking. The vision builds toward a future pressing rapidly upon us. As we near the end of the century, the students of today, who will have the power to affect change in ways not even imagined a century earlier, must make sound decisions. The vision of Growing Thinkers is that it is possible both to support and to develop teachers who will teach in a way that empowers the kind of thinking necessary to make the decisions that lie ahead.

The vision of growth through recognition, investment, support, and development of teachers has been realized. The result has been as expected—enthusiastic, revitalized teachers, experimenting with challenging methods for teaching thinking in the classroom, and renewed hope for the possibility of meaningful and creative learning and teaching.

NOW

Comments From Participants

Those who designed the Growing Thinkers program expect that it will have a positive impact on teachers, making them more commited and more enthusiastic about teaching, and making the participants better teachers. The program succeeds in this goal. A quick survey of responses will give you an idea of how enthusiastic the teachers who participated are about the program, its effect on them personally, and its impact on their teaching.

- "I would like to say that this fellowship has enabled my teaching skills to grow more than any other single event in my career...for all this and more then, thank you, and I hope I can continue to work with you on this important project."
- "All of the sessions left me highly motivated, enthusiastic, and eager to get back to the classroom to try out something new."
- "[Thinking like an artist] helped me the most personally to get over some blocks I had — 'I'm not talented. I can't...' Realizing that about myself helped me be able to relate to kids who say, 'I can't, so I could get them beyond that point."
- "The readings were great! ...I will be reading and re-reading them this summer..."
- "Each session was a new adventure. During the sessions I gained energy and eventually thinking about a session turned to action in the classroom each time."
- "I seemed to get the most out of the active experiences (in the session, "Thinking like an artist"). Talking to the artists was most informative. I enjoyed these experiences so much that I realized children need to have these experiences more."
- "Thank you so much for giving me inspiration, confidence, and motivational desire to continue teaching as I thought it should be done. My fears of being a different teacher were 'all washed away'. I feel rejuvenated and confident with all that I learned."

REACH

Vol. II, Part 1

Exemplary Program Practices Series

The Growing Thinkers Program is one of six programs highlighted in REACH, Vol. II, Parts 1-6. A training package for each of the six identified programs has been developed and can be requested through the Educational Service Centers. Training package includes: brochure, videotapes, videoguides, workshop outlines, fact sheets, and implementation guides on each of the six practices.

This REACH document is a publication of the Texas Education Agency, Division of Exemplary Programs. The Division's objective is to identify and disseminate information on exemplary and/or innovative school practices throughout Texas. The production and dissemination of this REACH document and associated training materials were conducted by NuStats, Inc. of Austin under the Exemplary Program Practices series contract to TEA. For additional copies of REACH Vol. II, Parts 1-6, please contact Publications Distribution, Texas Education Agency, 1701 N. Congress Ave., Austin, Texas, 78701-1494 in writing. The cost is $1.00 per copy.